

VZCZCXRO7872
PP RUEHAG RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHDBU RUEHLH RUEHPW RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHAH #0288/01 0621153
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 031153Z MAR 09
FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2394
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 4881
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2647
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2512
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 3125
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 3357

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000288

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN; DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/02/2019

TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: POSITIVE SITUATION FOR EVANGELICALS
IN TURKMENABAT

Classified By: Charge Richard Miles, reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: An evangelical pastor in Turkmenabat recently reported that things have gone well for his church since it completed its registration process last year. The church holds a weekly service in a rented meeting room. He said the church has many Muslim converts to Christianity who feel pressure from family and neighbors. The church would like to offer a weekly adult bible study, but has not been able to receive permission from the local council on religious affairs. Nonetheless, the pastor was committed to pursuing the church's right to hold the adult class and showed no reluctance to engage with authorities on the issue, seeing it as an opportunity to inform them about his church's beliefs. END SUMMARY.

THE PATH TO BECOMING A REGISTERED CHURCH

12. (C) On February 26, Political Officer met with Pastor Jabar Aliyev of the Source of Life Church (Istochnik Zhizni) at his apartment in Turkmenabat. Aliyev's congregation received registration from the Ministry of Justice on September 24, 2007. Following registration at the national level, the church waited another six months before receiving local registration on March 26, 2008. Aliyev said that since that time, things have gone well and the church does not have any problems with the authorities. The church rents space for a weekly meeting in a cultural center. Usually between 80-90 people attend the Sunday service. Aliyev said the church is loosely affiliated with the evangelical denomination called Full Gospel Church or Word of Life, although it does not receive any outside financial support. The church was founded about ten years ago by Russian missionaries from Moscow. They were pastors and entered Turkmenistan before there was a visa regime for Russian citizens. The missionaries stayed for several years until the authorities finally kicked them out. Eight years ago Pastor Aliyev's wife, Ilzira, had heard about what was then an underground church from a friend. At Ilzira's urging, Aliyev, then a drug addict, attended the church and as a result of his experience there, quit using drugs. He eventually attended the Word of Life Bible School in Dushanbe, where he received his training to become a pastor.

13. (C) Regarding registration, Aliyev explained that there

were two possible categories for a church, either as an organization, which is valid throughout the country, or as a group, which is valid only at the provincial level. The Turkmenabat church was registered as a religious group. There are two other Word of Life churches with pending registrations, in Turkmenbashi and in Ashgabat. Aliyev said he wanted the authorities to understand that his church is not dangerous. He noted that both the national and local Councils on Religious Affairs (CRA) do not have protestant representatives or advisors, resulting in a lack of understanding about protestant beliefs. He said his congregation would like to address social problems. They currently work with drug addicts on an individual basis, but would like to set up a drug treatment center. Aliyev also noted the problem of recidivism among criminals and would like to conduct prison visits.

WORKING TO UPHOLD THE CHURCH'S RIGHTS

¶4. (C) Pastor Aliyev mentioned that there are more Turkmen than Russians attending the church. He said that ethnic Turkmen, if they become Christians, become subject to pressure from family and neighbors. According to Aliyev, in Turkmenistan, there is no street evangelism -- people would be too afraid to listen. But he said that church members talk openly with other people about their faith on a one-on-one basis. They also talk about their beliefs with the authorities. The church would like to hold a bible study for adult members on a day other than the day of the church service, but to date, local authorities have not allowed it.

ASHGABAT 00000288 002.2 OF 002

However, the church's bylaws, approved by the Ministry of Justice, include such meetings among the church's activities.

Aliyev mentioned this as an example of an activity approved at a higher level that is blocked at the local level. In reviewing this issue, the local CRA referred to the sixth point in the church's bylaws that would require additional permission from the national CRA in order to conduct a school for children. The pastor pointed out that it is the fifth point, allowing the church to give members additional teaching, that should be applied. He said they'll continue pursuing the bible study issue with the local CRA because they have a legal right and the authorities are "violating the law." The local CRA is chaired by Lebap Province's chief imam. According to Aliyev, at both the local and national levels, the CRAs say that Muslims do not have the right to have schools (madrasahs), and therefore Christians also cannot have schools.

CRA NEEDS BETTER INFORMATION ABOUT PROTESTANTISM

¶5. (C) Addressing a broader point, Aliyev said the national and local CRAs should have someone, either as a member or as an advisor, who can provide accurate information about protestantism. He said the CRA members do not understand about protestant beliefs and the Orthodox member of the national CRA gives his own views. At the same time, the pastor said it is good that there is strict control over religion so that false groups and sects cannot get established. He also thought that previously the authorities may have confused his church with the Jehovah's Witnesses, complicating the group's registration process.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: Pastor Aliyev is young, dynamic and committed to his cause. He seems unfazed by the difficulties that his church has faced in the past, as well as by the challenges ahead as the church seeks to expand its activities. That the pastor is pragmatic was also apparent in his support for the CRAs as a guard against "false groups," a role that he felt shows "there are good aspects to be found in every place." Perhaps if his church had not eventually passed muster and been registered, his view of the control function of the CRAs would be less favorable. END COMMENT.

MILES